

## **CHINA – Qinghai Province - 2011.**

18<sup>th</sup> May – 7<sup>th</sup> June.

Karen & me plus 4 friends from Canada, joined forces for a fairly comprehensive bird and mammal watching trip through the remote Qinghai province, ably guided by Jesper Hornskov. ( [goodbirdmail@gmail.com](mailto:goodbirdmail@gmail.com) ) His vast experience in this region and ability to speak fluent Chinese allied to his professional attitude to tour leading and great sense of humour, made for a most enjoyable tour. He designed the tour for us ( based on 40+ previous visits ), and provided two excellent drivers with 4x4 vehicles, and took care of the internal flights from Beijing to Xining.

### **Flights:**

We flew from Heathrow via Munich with Lufthansa, as they provided reasonable prices and a short connection time in Munich. There are many alternatives on this route, but be aware that many of the most attractively priced involve long connections !

### **Weather and timing:**

This was relatively early in the season to do the trip, but the hope was that the mammals especially would be more abundant and easier to see before levels of disturbance from the domestic herdsmen / women and their flocks caused some species to move further away from the roads... This seemed to work given the numbers of some species encountered. As expected, we encountered a wide range of weather from warm ( 27c ) in Beijing, to sub zero at high altitude, and everything from glorious sun to rain, sleet, snow, hail and even a tornado at one point ! Fortunately there was little in the way of strong winds, so even when it was cold, the conditions were bearable.

### **Altitude:**

An important factor for me especially ( as I had suffered with the effects of altitude sickness before ), was the care in the preparation of the itinerary that Jesper took to allow for proper acclimatization. A significant portion of the trip was at altitudes above 3000m and for some time over 4000m. The highest point being 4800+m. Although we took the precaution of carrying Diamox in case, none of us suffered any problems at all, despite many strenuous walks in such of some key species ( mainly birds ).

### **Guides:**

Jesper has a reputation as a very competent bird guide, but we were pleasantly surprised at how familiar he was with the mammals, and where we could hope to see them. He is highly recommended.

Note: It is very difficult to give sites for the mammals listed for several reasons. Many places that we visited do not have names, and the locations when listed on maps use a wide variation in spellings ! A number of the species are also very mobile when it comes to the prevailing weather; frequent overnight snowfall often seemed to encourage species lower down into the valleys.

### **Itinerary:**

- 18<sup>th</sup> - Leave Heathrow mid afternoon to fly to Munich, and from there to Beijing.
- 19<sup>th</sup> - Arrive in Beijing and transfer to the                    hotel. Afternoon spent with many others (!) exploring the Forbidden City & Tiannamen Square.
- 20<sup>th</sup> - With the others now arrived from their pre-trip extension, we all visited the Great Wall at Badaling and then Wild Duck Lake and finally the Summer Palace.
- 21<sup>st</sup> - Jesper now joined us, and we took an early flight to Xining, and after checking into our hotel explored the hills outside the city.
- 22<sup>nd</sup> - Early start to drive north to an attractive forest near Datong. Morning spent exploring here. Afterwards drive on beginning to climb towards the Tibetan plateau, making stops as necessary. Night at Xihai.
- 23<sup>rd</sup> - Headed for the huge lake called Koko Nor spending all morning birding here. After lunch nearby, we climbed the first serious pass in poor weather, Eventually arriving in the town of Chaka. Late birding nearby.
- 24<sup>th</sup> - All day exploring various habitats in the area.
- 25<sup>th</sup> - All day in the area travelling to other areas within an hour or so of Chaka.
- 26<sup>th</sup> - Pre-dawn start to cross the high pass after heavy overnight snow. Approx 700 heavy lorries stuck on ice only slowed us for a while ! Morning birding. After lunch near Koko Nor, we drove to Gong He. Late afternoon nearby.
- 27<sup>th</sup> - Long drive towards Wenquan crossing some very high and remote areas, for birds and mammals as appropriate.
- 28<sup>th</sup> - More snow prevented our hoped for exploration here, so we continued driving encountering impressive numbers of mammals. Later we reached the Bayankala Pass – the highest point of the trip. Eventually arrived in Yushu – the city devastated by a huge earthquake two years ago ! Overnight here.
- 29<sup>th</sup> - Left Yushu and visited marshes, gorges and upland valleys before crossing the Mekong river and arriving in Nangqian for 3 nights.
- 30<sup>th</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> - Three days exploring areas around the area.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> - A long drive back via Yushu to Qumalai stopping for anything of interest.

- 3<sup>rd</sup> - Another long driving day ( 400 miles ), but producing good numbers of mammals from the road. Arrived at Golmud late afternoon.
- 4<sup>th</sup> - Left Golmud early and continued back to Chaka, thus completing a loop. Stops en route as normal.
- 5<sup>th</sup> - Retraced our route via Koko Nor to Xining arriving in the evening.
- 6<sup>th</sup> - Early exploration of a forested area near Xining. Afternoon flight back to Beijing. Overnight in a hotel near the airport.
- 7<sup>th</sup> - Lunchtime flight back to London via Munich.



Black-lipped Pikas

### **Birds:**

Our trip produced a very respectable 225 species including many localised and rare. Highlights included Black-necked Cranes, Ibisbill, Tibetan Snowcock, Blood Pheasant, White-eared Pheasant, Tibetan & Pallas' Sandgrouse, Snow Pigeon, Azure-winged Magpie, Mongolian Ground-Jay, Hume's Groundpecker, Przevalski's, Guldenstadt's, Daurian & Hodgson's Redstarts, Tibetan Babax, Przevalski's Rosefinch, 6 sp. of Snowfinch, Wallcreeper and Kozlov's Bunting.

## Mammals:

Gansu Pika - *Ochotona cansus* One individual located by Phil in the forest on 22<sup>nd</sup>, gave superb views.

Black-lipped Pika - *Ochotona curzoniae* Super abundant at high levels on the plateau. Literally thousands seen. Recorded on six days.

Glover's Pika - *Ochotona gloveri* This attractive Pika was seen singly on two days ( 24<sup>th</sup> & 31<sup>st</sup> ) It favours arid rocky areas.

Woolly Hare - *Lepus oiostolus* Widespread and seen on 9 days.

Tolai Hare - *Lepus tolai* Two found by Karen in the hills above Xining on 21<sup>st</sup>.

Himalayan Marmot - *Marmota himalayana* Another common species at high levels. Recorded on 11 days.

Tibetan Fox - *Vulpes ferrilata* One of the star mammals. Seen regularly in certain areas, though not widespread. A total of 23 seen on 3 days.

Red Fox - *Vulpes vulpes* 6 individuals seen on 4 days. Smart looking when compared to many in the UK !



Tibetan Fox.

- Grey Wolf - *Canis lupus* Seen on the 28<sup>th</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup>; all singles. A close individual on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, ignored our vehicles and continued to hunt within 50 yards of us ! Voted mammal of the trip.
- Mountain Weasel - *Mustella altaica* Brief looks at one as we stopped at Bayankala Pass, left most of us frustrated as only Brian and our lead driver saw it...
- Asian Badger - *Meles leucurus* One ran from the ditch alongside the road, up the hill shortly after dawn on the 2<sup>nd</sup>; fortunately seen by both vehicles. Currently not split from Eurasian Badger by all authorities.
- Thorold's Deer - *Cervus albirostris* According to Jesper not regularly encountered, we were fortunate to find 3 individuals on 30<sup>th</sup> and 3 different animals in a nearby area on the 1<sup>st</sup>. Sometimes called White-lipped Deer.
- Red Deer - *Cervus elaphus* Seen more regularly than Thorold's – 17+ seen on 3 days.
- Goitered Gazelle - *Gazella subgutturosa* 14 seen shortly after dawn on the 25<sup>th</sup> spread out in one valley – shy and apparently hunted...
- Tibetan Gazelle - *Gazella picticaudata* In the course of several driving days after overnight snow, we counted spectacular numbers ! On 28<sup>th</sup> our total was 666 seen and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> 566 counted ! Only seen on one other day.
- Przewalski's Gazelle - *Gazella przewalskii* We had little chance of locating this very rare animal, though Jesper had seen it in the past... Amazingly despite it being mid-afternoon we found 18 very distantly, before walking in to get good telescope views ( 4<sup>th</sup> ). A huge bonus !
- Chiru - *Pantholops hodgsonii* Also called Tibetan Antelope. Numbers are now vastly reduced, and we had added a day to our original itinerary in the hope of getting this, and Tibetan Sandgrouse. We scored with both, and while we were watching about 20 Chiru, Jesper scanned distantly and counted an astonishing 247 !!
- Bharal (Blue Sheep) - *Pseudois nayaur* Widespread in mountainous areas. Seen on 6 days with day counts close to three figures.
- Kiang - *Equus kiang* Found in similar areas to the Tibetan Gazelle, also in large numbers. On the 28<sup>th</sup> we counted 434 and 286 on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.



Kiang or Asiatic Wild Ass.

Pere David's Rock Squirrel - *Sciurotamias davidianus* One from the Great Wall at Badaling on 20<sup>th</sup>.

Mid-day Jird - *Meriones meridianus* One seen and photographed after dawn on 24<sup>th</sup> west of Chaka, was a new mammal for Jesper !

Also recorded:

Domestic Yak and Domestic Bactrian Camels were widespread.

On the pre-tour extension around Dalian on the coast NE of Beijing the others had 4+ Finless Porpoises and a Japanese Pipistrelle.

Things we missed:

Our hopes for Pallas' Cat were thwarted by bad weather in several places that Jesper has seen them before. ( This may not be the ideal time of year to look for this species ). Other trips in the area have recorded Tibetan Dwarf Hamster, Steppe Polecat, Eastern Roe Deer, Eurasian Otter & Brown Bear – though all are far from guaranteed.

Wild Yak is possible, but requires a days extra driving from our route, and sightings are not certain.

Snow Leopard has been seen on one occasion – nearly 15 years ago. They are undoubtedly around – best of luck !

NB. Jesper Hornskov has had a look at these notes and said "As for additional mammals - Wild Yak should be REASONABLY DEPENDABLE if you add a day, and you'd most likely also see Argali. Pallas' Cat - given reasonable weather (we were unlucky that the weather was bad when we'd otherwise have had a fair chance to see this superb animal) one should see it.

Steve Davis & Karen Baker - 2011